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ABSTRACT

During 1990 and 1991 an access and support program for Australian Aboriginal adult students was implemented at the Faculty of Health Science campus of the University of Sydney (Australia). The program offered support for those interested in the health sciences and featured preparatory, orientation and supplementary support courses under special entry arrangements. Program implementation was a long, slow process that began in 1986 with an policy statement but no supporting services. The work of individuals in the Aboriginal Education Unit began to put a program in motion. Most of the participants came to the program as older students with an interest in education to increase self-determination for themselves and their communities. Most participants had difficult, non-supportive past educational experiences. These students often had other responsibilities, roles and obligations which were as important as being a students. Students had difficulty accepting and relating to educational approaches which had them learning content in preparation for the future with less relevance for the present. The program centered around a large room which allowed study space, tutoring support and an area to socialize with other Aboriginal students. Negotiation with students on their learning program and developing learning strategies were also important components. (JB)

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ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PRINCIPLES TO ACCESS ABORIGINAL STUDENTS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

Paper given at the 1992 ACAL National Conference Sydney

By Maria Nugent, Lecturer, Koori Centre, The University of Sydney

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ADULT BASIC EDUCATION PRINCIPLES TO ACCESS ABORIGINAL STUDENTS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Between 1990 - 1991 I was involved in setting up an access and support program for Aboriginal people wishing to study degrees in the health sciences - such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and nursing at the Faculty of Health Science campus of The University of Sydney. Today I am going to talk about how we went about developing and implementing that program. I also want to describe some of the most important features of the preparatory, orientation and supplementary support courses we offer to students entering university under special entry arrangements. I owe a lot to what I am going to say today to the students we work with.

1. BACKGROUND TO GETTING THE ACCESS POLICY IMPLEMENTED

Getting the program developed and implemented was a long and slow process. An access policy (which consists of selection criteria, procedures for selecting applicants and provisions for academic support) was written and endorsed by the Faculty back in 1986 but it wasn't until 1990 and 1991 that it was developed or implemented in any meaningful way. It was printed each year in the handbook but nothing really happened with it - it was just there. I think that Faculty felt pretty good about themselves having such a policy but that it wasn't their fault if no Aboriginal people were applying. They figured there were just no Aboriginal people out there wanting to apply or in a position to undertake degree level study. I thought that this was a fairly narrow view of access. The faculty was doing very little to make the courses they offered accessible to Aboriginal people. The special entry policy stated the need for adequate and appropriate academic and non-academic support for Aboriginal people coming through special entry arrangements but there was none in place. It also outlined the need to interview all applicants applying through special entry arrangements but this also wasn't being done. It wasn't until Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working in the Aboriginal Education Unit started pushing for these things that anything really happened. By this time the Aboriginal Education Unit was staffed by three Aboriginal academic staff members and myself and this was fundamental to getting the access policy implemented. Before this only one Aboriginal person at a time had been employed and they were usually so overloaded with trying to co-ordinate a teaching program for Aboriginal health workers that they couldn't address the issue of access to degree courses. This makes it clear that adequate staffing is essential to programs for Aboriginal people in universities. Its not just a matter of good intentions.

So to get the program developed and implemented we started by establishing an internal working party, which consisted of academic staff (some of whom were heads of schools), staff from student services, and staff from the Aboriginal Education Unit. The working group was extremely important because corporately it had quite a bit of decision making power within the Faculty. It was able to apply the pressure needed to get the access policy and its associated programs developed and implemented. Unless the issue gets put on the agenda and gets talked about throughout the institution nothing happens. It was also important because it meant that we weren't trying to get something done in isolation. We had co-operation from teaching staff and this was really important in developing a support program which was relevant to the needs of students. The teaching staff had lots of ideas about what students coming into health science degrees need.

But pressure for the program did not only come from people within the Faculty. The demand also came from Aboriginal people outside the Faculty. The Aboriginal Education Unit was becoming increasingly well know in Aboriginal communities throughout NSW since it had been teaching the Associate Diploma in Health Sciences (Aboriginal Health and Community Development) for a number of years. This was a course for community based Aboriginal healthworkers run on block release mode. It was students and graduates of the Associate Diploma or their relatives and friends who initially began to enquire about degree-level courses provided by the Faculty. As well an Aboriginal liaison officer was employed who visited Aboriginal communities and organisations throughout NSW to promote and talk about the activities of the Unit and this helped to increase the profile of the Faculty. The importance of word of mouth and familiarity with the educational institution cannot be underestimated in the success of university based programs for Aboriginal people. It also demonstrates the need for the educational institution to go out into communities to make itself more accessible, not just write up access policies and wait for the students to arrive.

So importantly the program was generated by Aboriginal people and others from both inside and outside the University environment, rather than being imposed by the university and/or some government agency.

We also collaborated with current and prospective Aboriginal students to develop appropriate and relevant support provisions. We did this mostly by just talking with them informally about their needs as students within the university. Some of these discussions we taped. A number of issues arose which were important to address in the academic support courses being developed.

2. *ISSUES ARISING FROM DISCUSSIONS*

1. MOTIVATION

Firstly, many students said that their motivation to undertake tertiary studies was to do with issues of in their words "self determination for their communities" and "self determination for themselves". They didn't want to participate in tertiary education to receive (in their words again) 'proper' qualifications, just for the sake of it - or because someone was telling them they should. Many of the students we first worked with were mature age and so they had a wide range of experience, as parents, as workers and as community members. They wanted to contribute to their community as well as do something for their kids and for themselves. Tertiary education was the way they wanted to achieve their goals. This meant that once they got into courses they were fairly committed to staying, but not at all costs. If they felt that tertiary study was making them change into people they didn't want to be, or to change values which were important to them then they'd want to leave. Often tertiary study can be at cross purposes with Aboriginal people's aim of self determination especially when it forces Aboriginal people to 'assimilate' into the system rather than get from it that which they want. It was important to develop a support program which assisted students in achieving their goals but not at the expense of their values and what they thought important. They wanted to be themselves, not imitation white students.

2. EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION

Many students also talked about their experience of education and their feelings about themselves as learners. For many their experience of education up until this time had not been good. Most of the mature age students had not gone beyond Year 10 and remembered school in terms of failure. They spoke about education and learning in terms of whether you were brainy or dumb, meaning that the brainy succeeded and the dumb failed. Even those who had completed HSC questioned their ability as learners. Because of this, many of those who entered degree courses at the Faculty under special entry arrangements felt they were intruding - that really they had no right to be participating in education; that they had come through the 'backdoor', and that some day they'd be found out and asked to leave. This I think revealed a common belief within the University that Aboriginal people (and others) should not be given special privileges because they had not earnt their right to education. White students had earnt their right to education by succeeding at high school.

A couple of short anecdotes will help to illustrate the point I am trying to make. In the very first classes attended by physiotherapy students a commonly asked question is what Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) mark did you get. The students we work with were

not offered places on the basis of their TER mark and hence were put in a position of having either to justify how and why they had been offered a place, or else lie.

Another case was when one student ended up in a class with someone she had known at high school in year 10, but they had finished Higher School Certificate (HSC) at different schools. When the other girl found out the Aboriginal student was studying physiotherapy she wanted to know how she had got so brainy all of a sudden.

These comments from students I think reflect a commonly held belief that one's intelligence can be measured, and that having achieved a certain TER mark gives one a indisputable right to education (at the expense often of others). These stories I think show that Aboriginal students are up against more than just 'lack of pre-requisite knowledge' - they are also up against views and attitudes about education which are exclusionary and elitist. The Aboriginal students we were working with didn't feeling confident as learners in the first place (especially in comparison to their classmates) and the students and teachers in their courses weren't doing much to make them feel any better. So much of what we had to address in the program was to do with confidence as learners, and central to this was students' own evaluation of their learning rather than depending on results from external assessment to measure their progress.

3. RESPONSIBILITIES, ROLES AND OBLIGATIONS OF STUDENTS TO DO WITH MEMBERSHIP OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Another issue which came through strongly as we spoke and worked with students was that they have a wide range of other responsibilities, roles and obligations which are as important, if not more important, than being a student. Often these are related to their membership as part of an Aboriginal community. For example, students at different times of the year need to attend funerals of relatives in different parts of the state. Sick children or relatives are also an important responsibility which at times can interfere with study and ability to attend courses. Sometimes students from country areas become quite homesick and wish to go home for short periods of time during semester. Aboriginal students we work with want education and qualifications but not necessarily at the expense of other things.

Now of course, when students don't turn up for the classes you've organised and which you think are important, it is discouraging. In this situation it is easiest to blame non attendance on lack of motivation or interest. However, when I spoke with students about it, it was clear that this wasn't the case. It was just that something other than study took priority at that time. Many people would say that this means it is almost impossible for Aboriginal people to undertake university study. I don't think so and

believe that there are a number of ways to work around this. Ultimately though the institution also needs to make some changes to the way it is organises and structures it teaching programs to ensure that Aboriginal people have access to the education it provides. Some ways we've been experimenting with this is through taping lectures and setting up our own learning environments (including mini-laboratories) within the Aboriginal Education Unit so that students can cover work they've missed outside of class time. Also by using the lecturers who teach on the degree programs to teach on the academic support program weprovide, students have another opportunity to catch up. Another way we try to do this is that in first couple of years of a degree students enrol in a reduced load. This builds flexibility into their study program.

4. RELEVANCE OF WHAT THEY WERE LEARNING TO THEIR GOALS

The students we worked with also talked a lot about the importance of the relevance of the support we were providing to their learning needs. I'll illustrate what I mean. It was often expressed by lecturers we spoke with (particularly those who taught in science subjects) that all students required 'fundamental' knowledge and that knowledge was like building blocks - students needed to completely understand one block before being able to move onto the next. Even though it was agreed that some students would have found it easier if they had more (or in a few cases some) background in the content being taught, the Aboriginal students we were working with did not necessarily agree with the idea that you had to well and truly have the basics before being able to proceed to the next stage. They did not see lack of pre-requisite knowledge as a barrier to their participation in degree courses.

An example will help to make this clearer. Some students were struggling with chemistry. We employed a tutor who was intent on teaching the basics. The tutor would often say to them you don't need this now but when you study such and such you'll need it then. Students did not respond to such an approach since it placed too much emphasis on learning material now for a future time. The students only wanted the basics insofar as it could help them keep up with the work they were covering today. The basics being taught weren't directly relevant to what they were doing even though they were inherently interesting and important to the chemistry tutor. This is where I think many preparation/bridging programs for Aboriginal people become unstuck. They are based on a type of deficiency model and are concerned only with filling in the gaps in students' knowledge, believing that all students need to share a common body of knowledge if they are to succeed. In fact most bridging programs within universities are based on this model (the word bridging being telling).

The other problem with many of the preparation programs being offered are that what is being taught is not specifically related to what will be taught in the courses that students hope to do or is doing at that time. In the courses we offer we make explicit the link between what we are teaching and what is taught and expected in the degree courses. This is easier at Faculty level because of the commonality among degrees. This is where providing supplementary support concurrently to students while they study a degree is a good model. It is also where the importance of employing teachers on the degree courses to work with our students is important. As well using the curriculum from the first six weeks of semester one of the degree the students are hoping to participate in as the basis for the preparatory program also works because of its relevance.

As already mentioned, three specific academic support courses were developed. They are a semester long preparatory course in maths, science and study skills, a three week long intensive orientation course held just prior to the beginning of the academic year in anatomy and study skills, and a concurrent support course over the first two years of a degree course. In this one, students do the first year of their degree over two years during which time they participate in supplementary classes in science, maths and study skills. Now I want to look at are some of the general principles and strategies we use in each of the programs which I think have been instrumental to their success.

The courses we developed are not based solely on 'filling in gaps in knowledge' - I refer to these as topping up programs (which is what many bridging programs are based on). Nor are they based only on teaching the skills needed for successful study - which I refer to as bag of tricks programs. Rather their primary aim was to empower students to cope within the University environment/culture. They emphasise the process of learning rather than the product. We concentrate on providing students with opportunities to become independent learners. That isn't to say we ignore content and technique altogether - we just don't make it the primary focus. We use it to achieve our broader aim of understanding the process of learning and taking control of that process. Basically we treat students as adults and they like that.

3. ASPECTS OF THE PROGRAMS

1. SPACE/ENVIRONMENT VS STRUCTURED TIMETABLE

The overall access and support program can be better described as a place rather than as an academic course. Even though to some extent it is a formal academic course which students enrol into this is coupled with lots of informal learning opportunities. The whole support program for Aboriginal people within the Faculty centres around one large room. This space or environment is the most important aspect of the whole

program for a number of reasons. The room is set up with long tables around which about eight people can study at a time. In the room there are textbooks, anatomical models and posters and other learning resources. The room is open between 8am and 9pm. Tutors, who are mostly third or fourth year students, are employed on a kind of roster system so that when students drop in to study, there is usually someone there to answer questions or to give assistance. Students also help each other out with their study. The room is next door to the Aboriginal student' coffee room so that study and socialising with other Aboriginal students kind of becomes one and the same activity and reinforce each other. Students don't need to leave the study environment to go and meet with other students. This interaction with other students is also a really important aspect of the program. First year students learn a lot from second or third year students who are in the same place doing their own things and modelling learning approaches. It also means that preparatory course students are mixing with and talking to students already enrolled in degree courses.

The students really feel that they belong in that room and that's important because out there on the campus and in the lecture halls they don't usually feel that welcome. Staff offices are close by which means that we have ongoing contact and interaction with the students and so we are constantly talking to them about what is happening in their courses and what type of support they are needing. We don't have to wait till scheduled class time to talk to them. It also means that they are constantly interacting with Aboriginal staff members. Some of the best teaching we do about learning strategies is in informal conversations with students. We address issues to do with their learning as they arise rather than as skills separate from content. Students enjoy being able to study in a supportive and non-threatening environment.

I think that it is particulary important in setting up programs for Aboriginal people within educational institutions that there is not only a philosophical committment to whats being done, but that adequate resources, especially space are made available. The important thing about this supportive study arrangement which combines informal assistance and formal assistance is that it allows flexibility. Students can respond to the things which are happening in their lives as well as to study. It also means that students have lots of opportunities to build up relationships with each other and with staff, and they have somewhere where they can go to be themselves.

2. NEGOTIATING WITH STUDENTS

We build negotiation with students about their learning into the program in as many ways as possible. For example, in the preparatory program students negotiate what they will do each day by filling in a blank timetable as we go depending on what has

been covered rather than keeping up with a timetable thats determined before they commence the course. We have a good idea before we begin the course about what content and skills we want to teach but the important thing about negotiating with students is that they take responsibility for keeping up with their work and monitor their own learning. Since in the preparation course we offer, we are most interested in helping students to develop strategies they'll need for studying at tertiary level we try not to let content dominate. Plenty of opportunities are made available for students to work on learning the material such as individual tutorial time and study skills workshops based on the day's work. This feedback from students helps us as teachers to identify the specific content areas and skills where students (individually or as a group) need more assistance. The interesting thing about this is that we actually get through a lot of content because students become much more effective in keeping up as they go along. The maths component of the preparatory program is negotiated so that it is able to combine the needs students identified for themselves with material they need to cover for their degree course. But also we negotiate by just talking to them and by being open to what they say. We have ideas about what they need and they have ideas about what they need and we work around that.

The selection procedures used for the courses are also based on negotiation since we invite all applicants to come in to talk to us and they have the opportunity to indicate their strengths and weaknesses and to decide in consultation with us the most appropriate type of support needed - that is whether they should do pre-course preparation, or full load, or reduced load with support.

3. DEVELOPING LEARNING STRATEGIES

In our approach to teaching content and to teaching study skills we stress the process of learning. We do this in a number of ways. Study skills classes at the beginning of the courses look at myths about intelligence and we spend a lot of time talking about the way in which knowledge is constructed, organised and taught in universities. We teach study skills as they specifically relate to the content being taught in the course. This means, for example, that different skills are taught for anatomy and chemistry. In anatomy we place emphasis on strategies used for learning a new language and for learning visually whereas for chemistry we concentrate more on memory activities and defining terms. In this we move away from the idea that there is an ideal student and that effective learning is just a matter of technique. Instead we try to show that there are a number of ways to learn things, but that some ways are more appropriate for some subjects than others. Students are encouraged to think about they ways in which they enjoy learning and to experiment with a number of approaches until they find ones which are effective for them. We do this by structuring our classes like workshops

where students work together or individually to learn the material during the course using some of the methods we have shown them. As well we often use a team teaching approach particularly in a subject like anatomy so that as the content is being taught we can also talk about different ways of learning that material. Third and fourth year students working as tutors become important here because they also talk with the students about how they study. Throughout our interactions with students, both inside and outside classes, we talk a lot about knowledge and learning to try to show that it isn't all a mystery - but that its possible to take responsibility for one's own learning rather than leaving it up to chance. For many students this is a rather radical concept given their school experiences.

CONCLUSION

I want to finish by saying that so far the program has been fairly successful. There are currently about seventeen Aboriginal students studying degrees in thehealth sciences such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and health information management. Even though many of those students struggle quite a lot they hang in there. I think they do because they get a lot of support from each other and from the Aboriginal Education Unit. They also realise that its possible to learn how to be an effective learner - not just something left up to fate - but that it might just take some time. But most importantly they feel as though its in their reach. In this way the access and support program are empowering.